

**New Suburbanism: Sustainable Tall Building Development**, by Kheir Al-Kodmany, London and New York, Routledge, 2016, 284 pp., Paperback, \$77.99 (AUD), ISBN 978 11383 9282 3

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## **Book Review (by Dr Daniel O'Hare, Associate Professor Urban Planning, Bond University)**

*New Suburbanism: sustainable tall building development*, by Kheir Al-Kodmany, London and New York: Routledge 2016, 284pp, ISBN

This is a book that has been needed since Joel Garreau alerted us to “edge cities” in his 1991 book of that name. Kheir Al-Kodmany, Professor of Sustainable Urban Design at the University of Illinois in Chicago, has produced a scholarly and important book that critically analyses the emergence of tall buildings in North America’s sprawling suburbs. The book is impressive in its scope, covering a wide range of social, economic and environmental sustainability concerns from the scale of detailed building design to broader urban design and planning issues. Despite its US focus, this book is very relevant to similar trends emerging in the suburbs of cities in Canada, Australia and elsewhere. Al-Kodmany sets out a clear agenda, supported by extensive case study evidence, for how high-rise development might make a major contribution towards more sustainable suburbs and city regions.

The early chapters include an excellent literature review of the evolution of the sprawling American suburban landscape, creating a strong argument that a more sustainable approach is needed.

The book title, *New Suburbanism*, prompts some questions regarding the value of somewhat esoteric terminology to community understandings of urban and suburban development: for example, is a more ‘urban’ built form such as high-rise ‘sub-urban’? The concept of “new suburbanism” adds little to the existing overlaps and distinctions between better known terms such as new urbanism, smart growth and transit oriented development (TOD), all of which Al-Kodmany acknowledges have much in common with new suburbanism. On the other hand, the introduction of “vertical density” in suburbs does represent a new form of suburbanisation, so the book title is sound.

In the language of this book, there is a “flattening” of the city region due to the emergence of “suburban tall” in local centres amidst the suburban sprawl. The dominant metropolitan form of the American city for the past century – the high-rise CBD surrounded by endless sprawl – is being modified to more richly manifest the new polycentric city-region first observed by Garreau (1990) in his sometimes misinterpreted book, *Edge City*.

Al-Kodmany’s book will be of great interest to urban designers, planners, architects, property and construction professionals, developers, urban geographers and students and academics in these fields. It also provides valuable information for community members and political leaders who wish to be well-informed on the continuing development and retrofitting of suburbs to cope with changing demographics and the challenges of sustainability. The book’s expansive scope addresses this wide readership with research questions spanning:

- different methods and examples of integrating tall buildings into suburbs;
- triple bottom line sustainability aspects of tall building developments in suburbs; and
- sustainable architectural design approaches.

The book is densely written yet easy to read due to its clear structure and Al-Kodmany’s readable style of writing. It is enriched by many illustrated examples and the thorough indexing of key terms and examples. Suburban high-rise examples span both retrofitted and new-built suburbs and centres. The three city regions chosen as the sources of case studies represent three different types of city region: a large traditional city (Chicago), the US capital region around Washington DC, and a sunbelt metropolis (Miami). The case study choices also capture different responses reflecting the different climatic zones occupied by these three city regions.

At first, it seems that Al-Kodmany classifies suburban high-rise development patterns into too many spatial models (ten of them), until we remember the effects of a century of zoning in separating everything from everything else in American suburbia during the automobile era. So several of the spatial models have little to recommend them due to lack of mixed use and poor integration between urban development and public transport, when tall buildings are introduced at motorway interchanges, office parks, and gated communities. Some illustrations from Chicago suburbs depict towers marooned amidst parking lots and freeway interchanges. In contrast, Al-Kodmany finds his TB-TOD (tall buildings – transit oriented development) spatial model to be the most prevalent and most successful model, comprising 71 of the 96 tall building projects studied in the three city regions. The study further shows that this model has been most common in the Washington DC region, where there has been concerted effort over several decades to integrate strategic planning and transit investment to turn formerly car-dependent suburbs into walkable places with access to high quality public transport.

The book concludes somewhat inductively with an excellent discussion of density, acknowledging that high densities are possible to achieve in lower and mid-rise built forms as in many existing cities around the world. In this reviewer's opinion, the book would be strengthened by placing the discussion of density at the start rather than the end. The book might also be improved by regrouping the ten spatial models into a much smaller number of 'integrated-TOD' and 'non-integrated' models. Such a change would enable the book's contents to more strongly support the author's introductory and concluding arguments for developing sustainably integrated dense, walkable centres and communities based around effective public transport.

This book will complement another recent book, *Suburban Remix* (Beske and Dixon 2018), which uses detailed case studies of American and Canadian cities and Shanghai to illustrate how a new form of suburban urbanism is evolving. *Suburban Remix* and Al-Kodmany's *New Suburbanism*, considered both separately and together, make major contributions in a field declared in need of new literature by Laura Vaughan (2015) in *Suburban Urbanities* a year or so earlier.

## References

- Beske, J and D Dixon (eds) 2018, *Suburban Remix: creating the next generation of urban places*. Washington DC: Island Press.
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